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ABSTRACT

English prepositions are generally considered difficult to teach to nonnative speakers, for a variety of reasons: the large number of possible meanings for many prepositions, which change according to the context in which they are used; the lack of a written guide to usage; and, for native Arabic speakers, the commonly-used grammar-translation method of instruction and native language interference. Some potentially more effective approaches to teaching prepositions include C. Kreidler's association approach, A. Hornby's unit method, D. T. Langendoen's role-subdivisions, R. Close's relationships approach, and G. Pittman's demonstrable uses. However, in most of these approaches there is a stress on teaching isolated structures, even when situationalized, and little emphasis on real communication. The result has been inaccuracy in student usage. If communication is a primary goal of English teaching, teachers should begin instruction with real situations that are relevant to the students and concentrate on the prepositions and adverbs the student would need in order to be understood. Linguistic distinctions that students do not need to know should not be taught, errors should not be automatically corrected, and similarities between English and the native language should be pointed out. Prepositions used often in the classroom could be categorized as case, lexical, or unit prepositions for instructional purposes. (MSE)

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Teaching English Prepositions

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"Among those who teach or learn the English language, prepositions have earned a reputation for difficulty if not a downright unpredictability" (Pittman 1966). "Aside from the correct usage of particles, the greatest problem facing the student of English as a second language is, no doubt, the correct usage of English prepositions" (Takahashi 1969). "As any English teacher well knows, our prepositions are a particularly troublesome lot to the nonnative speaker of English" (MacCarthy 1972).

It is not surprising to read such statements in articles and books related to the teaching and learning of English; indeed, there seems to be a consensus concerning the difficulty of these little words.

SOURCES OF DIFFICULTY

One obvious source of difficulty is the number of meanings each preposition carries. Fries (1940) discovered an average of thirty-six and a half meanings recorded and illustrated in the *Oxford English Dictionary* for each of the nine most frequent prepositions (*at*, *by*, *for*, *from*, *in*, *of*, *on*, *to*, and *with*). The number of meanings ranges from fifteen (for the preposition *from*) to sixty-three (for *of*), as shown in the following table:

Preposition	Number of senses listed in the Oxford English Dictionary
<i>at</i>	39
<i>by</i>	39
<i>for</i>	31
<i>from</i>	15
<i>in</i>	40
<i>of</i>	63
<i>on</i>	29
<i>to</i>	33
<i>with</i>	40

Perhaps, as Fries points out, these meanings are not inherent in the prepositions themselves but lie in the contexts in which they are used. This only adds to the difficulty, because a change of meaning due to a change of context burdens the student with the necessity of learning still more meanings for the prepositions.

Some meanings are not demonstrable and cannot be learned by association with clearly defined classes of words. They might be determined by the words preceding the prepositions, but they remain abstract and chaotic. You look *at* the evidence, listen *to* it, believe *in* it, as Kreidler points out. He comments:

Anybody who has taught advanced foreign learners of English is aware that these abstract, chaotic functions of the prepositions remain a stumbling block long after mastery of essentials has been achieved (Kreidler 1966:120).

Two-word constructions

Another factor contributing to the difficulty of prepositions is that different prepositions used with the same word yield very different meanings. The verb+particle construction provides good examples of this: The meaning of a construction like *look at* changes completely if we substitute *for*, *up*, or *after* for *at*. Moreover, the meaning of a verb+particle is sometimes completely different from the individual meanings of its constituents. For example, *do in* in *He threatened to do in all those who betrayed him* means *kill*; *done for* in *I am done for* means *ruined*; and *come round* means to recover consciousness (Kreidler 1966:120).

Sometimes the difference in meaning is so subtle that it becomes difficult for the student to distinguish among the shades of meaning indicated by different prepositions in different contexts. An example of this is the difference between *concerned about*, which means to be worried about something, and *concerned with*, which means to be engaged in doing something. In other cases changing the preposition may not change the meaning, as, for example, in *complain about* and *complain of* (Kreidler 1966:120).

Yet another difficulty is caused by the different prepositions required by the different parts of speech of the same root word. We use one preposition with the verb form, another with the adjective, and still another one for the noun form of the word. For example, we are *fond of* something, but we have *fondness for* it. We *sympathize with* someone, we have *sympathy for* him, and we feel *sympathetic to* him (Kreidler 1966:121).

Lack of a guide

According to Takahashi, much of the difficulty in teaching and learning prepositions is due to the fact that "English speakers, even those who teach, are unable to offer a logical explanation for the occurrence of such prepositions or a conceptual guide of their usages." As long as definitions and examples of usage are lacking or inadequately represented in school texts, reference books, and dictionaries, the learning of prepositions will continue to depend mainly on memorization and familiarization. Although some people suggest that prepositions should be learned by analogy and inference, Takahashi concludes that these ways are accidental at best, and that the most acceptable method is simply learning by rote (Takahashi 1969:218).

SPECIAL PROBLEMS

In addition to these general problems, our students, whose native language is Arabic, face two particular

difficulties, stemming from (1) traditional methods of teaching and (2) interference from the native language.

Methods of teaching

Despite several large-scale attempts to introduce the oral-aural method of language teaching, the method still most commonly used in the Middle East is grammar-translation. Even when a teacher uses oral-aural techniques, the students constantly translate in their minds. In some cases they find exact correspondence between the English preposition and its Arabic equivalent, and this encourages them to continue to translate directly. However, more often such translation does not yield the proper equivalent, as the following examples show:

- /huwa khā' fun min alkalbi/
*He is afraid from the dog.
- /huwa mughādirun 'ila Beirut/
*He is leaving to Beirut.

The Arabic word/khā'if/ ("afraid") always takes the preposition/min/, which is usually translated into English as "from." And/mughādirun/ ("leaving") always takes the preposition/'ila/, which is usually translated as "to." The students' tendency to translate, using the preposition that is "equivalent" to the preposition in their native language, thus often causes them to use the wrong preposition in English.

Interference from the native language

Related to the problem of translation is the problem of native-language interference. Although Arabic does have a class of words called prepositions, these are in many ways different from English prepositions, as I discovered in a contrastive study that I did on this subject (Zughoul 1973). To illustrate the kind of interference that occurs, I will give ten English sentences in which the preposition *on* is used in different contexts, together with the Arabic translations:

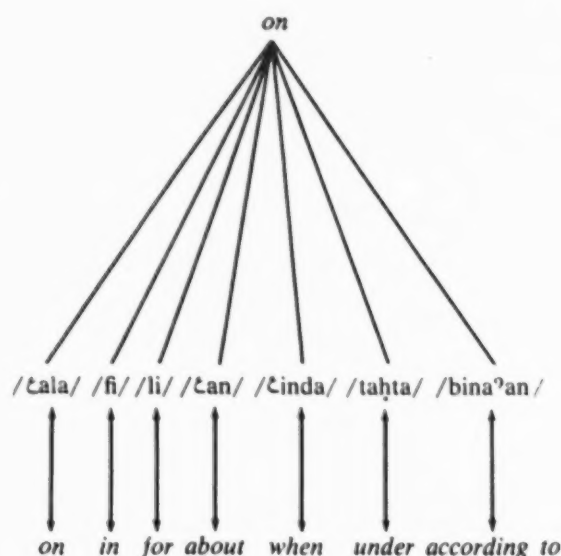
1. The book is *on* the table. /alkitābu ʿala alṭāwīlati/
2. He arrived *on* Sunday. /waṣala yawmu alahadi/
3. He accepted them *on* your advice. /qabilahum binā'an ʿala naṣiḥatika/
4. He arrived *on* the fifth of June. /waṣala fi lkhāmissi min ḥuzayrān/
5. *On* reaching the place, he phoned his father. /ʿinda wuṣūlihi almakāna, khābara abahu/
6. He is *on* probation. /huwa taḥta alṭajrubati/
7. The house is *on* (for) sale. /albaytu lilbayʿi/
8. He lectured *on* the energy crisis. /ḥāḍara ʿan azamati alṭāqati/
9. He did it *on* purpose. /ʿamilaha ʿāmidan/
10. He is *on* his days off. /huwa fi ayyāmi rāḥatihi/

Studying these ten sentences, we reach the following conclusions:

1. In some cases the English preposition corresponds exactly to its Arabic equivalent. In sentence 1, *on* translates /ʕala/ ("in contact with the upper surface of"). When *on* is used in this sense, in most cases it can be correctly translated as /ʕala/. This meaning of *on* is demonstrable and easy to teach, and the native language helps to clarify the meaning.

2. Sometimes, in expressing an idea in Arabic, we do not need to use a preposition (or any other word) to replace the English preposition. This is shown clearly in sentences 2 and 9. In sentence 2 the English preposition *on* precedes *Sunday*, but there is no preposition in the Arabic equivalent. Something takes place *on* a certain day in English, but it simply takes place that day in Arabic.

3. Usually students try to memorize one main equivalent for each English preposition. For example, they memorize /ʕala/ for *on* and /fi/ for *in*. While such one-for-one translation may give the proper English word in a number of cases, there are many instances in which it does not work. To illustrate: In sentences 4 and 10 the Arabic preposition /fi/ corresponds to English *on*, although /fi/ is usually expressed as *in*. Similarly, in sentence 7 *on* corresponds to /li/, which is usually translated as *for*. And in sentence 8, *on* is translated as /ʕan/, which is usually expressed as *about*. This overlap between English and Arabic prepositions is illustrated in the following diagram, which shows the usual English equivalents of seven Arabic words, each of which corresponds in some context to *on*.



4. The English preposition is not always expressed in Arabic by a preposition; its equivalent may be a different part of speech. For example, /tahta/ in sentence 6 and /ʕinda/ in sentence 5 are adverbs in Arabic.

SOME APPROACHES TO TEACHING PREPOSITIONS

With the above factors in mind, how can we make the teacher's work easier and more fruitful in dealing with these problematic little words?

Kreidler's "association" approach

Kreidler suggests that (1) meaning is not a reliable guide in the choice of prepositions because it is manifold, vague, and confusing and (2) acquiring skill in the correct use of these words depends more on forming an association between a preposition and the type of word or phrase that precedes or follows it. He sorted out 200 verbs into twenty-four patterns according to the prepositions that follow them. For example:

- _____ somebody *about* something /advise/ask/
caution/consult/
- _____ with somebody *about* something /disagree/
argue/ confer/ consult/ communicate/de-
bate/differ/discourse/dispute/
- _____ with somebody *for* something /bargain/
compete/intercede/plead/ (Kreidler 1966:
121-22)

The same method is proposed in *The Key to English: Prepositions*, which states that English prepositions seem to be chosen "only secondarily according to their inherent meanings, and the learner must memorize a great many idioms."

Hornby's "unit" method

One of the earliest proponents of learning English prepositions by association was Hornby (1966), who suggested that students learn the combinations of different prepositions with various nouns, verbs, and participles. He describes and presents exhaustive lists of patterns in which prepositions occur, and remarks that when a verb is closely linked with a preposition, the verb and preposition must be learned as a unit, as in his pattern 24: *You can rely upon that man / his discretion / his being discrete*. Hornby concludes that choosing the right preposition will be simple when the learner has become familiar with the various combinations of nouns, verbs, and prepositions through hearing and seeing them repeatedly in various contexts.

Langendoen's role-subdivisions

Langendoen points out in his *Essentials of English Grammar* that the choice of a preposition depends

mainly on the nominal expression following it; he correlates English prepositions with the "roles" played by the nominals that follow them. The preposition *with*, for example, very often introduces the instrument, *from* typically introduces the source. Accordingly, Langendoen assumes that (1) every role in the deep structure of the English sentence is accompanied by a preposition of its own and (2) this preposition might be deleted in certain cases. But there remains the problem of the same role being introduced by a variety of prepositions and the same preposition introducing different roles. To solve this problem, he suggests that those roles be subdivided. He points out, for example, that the role *location* can be subdivided into three classes: *location in*, *location at*, and *location by*. In the same way, the role *movement* may be divided into *movement from*, *movement around*, and *movement through*. The choice of a particular location or movement depends on the nominal expression following the preposition:

1. I live *in* Coshohocken, Pennsylvania.
2. I live *on* the east side of town.
3. I live *at* 77 Massachusetts Avenue.

In these three sentences *in*, *on*, and *at* have nothing to do with the verb *live*, but rather with what the following nominal expression designates. According to Langendoen, we choose *location in* in the first sentence because one lives *in* cities, towns, and countries, *on* in the second sentence because one lives *on* a particular street or section, *at* in the third sentence because one lives *at* a particular address (Langendoen 1970:87). (That is not true for all languages; in Arabic one lives *in* streets, cities, villages, and particular sections of the city.)

Langendoen implies that learning these prepositions depends on *understanding* the roles with their subdivisions and *associating* the role with a particular preposition.

Close's "relationships" approach

Close, in his book *Prepositions*, suggests a different approach. He says that prepositions should first be taught as representing relationships in space, that they should be seen and felt as precise expressions of position or movement in a certain direction. This should be accomplished through illustrations that the student can observe or make himself or through actions that he can perform or watch. Next, he says, they should be studied as expressions of relationship in time and, finally, as relationships of a more abstract kind. In this way, he concludes, they will be found to have clear meanings and to fit into some kind of system. Close suggests that for abstract relations the student should learn which prepositions are usually associated with what verbs,

nouns, and adjectives: "He must therefore take note of how prepositions are used in context and must imitate the same kind of usage himself" (Close 1967: 3-15).

Pittman's "demonstrable" uses

Like Close, Pittman suggests that the teacher start with demonstrable uses of the prepositions. The teacher should provide classroom situations in which prepositions and prepositional phrases can be used and practiced in visual contexts. As examples Pittman lists the demonstrable uses of *at* under several categories:

1. *at* (a point in space)

He is at the door.
He is at the window.
He is at the table.
She was at the desk.
He is at the entrance.

2. *at* (a part of the body)

It is at your feet.
He is at your side.
It is at your heels.

3. *at* (a point in time)

It arrived at 5:13.
He came at once.

4. *at* (a line)

He is at the wall.
They are at the fence.
They are at the seaside.

5. *at* (a position)

They are at the front
(of the queue).
They are at the rear
(of the queue).
They are at the extremities (of the queue).

6. *at* (an angle)

It is at an angle.
It was at an angle of 90°.
It is at an angle of 18°.

The teacher then moves from the demonstrable to the abstract, providing one semantic variety at a time. The following examples are taken from the uses of *in*, following the principle of one semantic variety at a time:

1. Say it in English.
French
German
Spanish
Japanese

2. They are in a crowd.
 a group
 a cluster
 a gathering
 the multitude
3. I would do it in my spare time.
 my leisure
 working hours
 the holidays
4. We walked in the fields in the hail.
 meadows heat
 park rain
 woods snow
 forest sleet

(Pittman 1966:1-3, 31)

It is possible, says Pittman, to relate the abstract nondemonstrable uses to one of the simpler demonstrable uses. For example, the teacher can lead his students from the demonstrable *on* meaning "attached to," as in *on a string/rope/thread*/, etc., to *on a stalk*, etc., from there to *on a list*, etc., and finally to *on the staff*, etc.

Pittman implies that the teacher should emphasize and develop links between the physical and abstract uses. Success here depends on the intelligence of the student and on their mother tongue. Chalkboard sketches such as the following example, where the arrow or movement illustrates abstract destination, may be helpful (Pittman 1966:ix-x).

They sank into disuse.
 desuetude.
 obscurity.

The problem of isolated structures

In most of the approaches I have described—and in many recent language-teaching methods—there is a stress on teaching isolated structures, even when these structures have been "situationalized." Such approaches are far from providing practice in real communication; prepositions are taught not because the student needs a certain one in order to communicate his thoughts, but because a group of them happen to cluster together in a particular taxonomic description. For example, *above* and *over*, *on* and *on top of*, *near* and *by*, *under* and *below* are frequently introduced together. This causes confusion and results in the students' inability to use them correctly in tests of grammatical accuracy. If, however, communication were made a primary goal of language teaching, one item from each pair would suffice until an advanced stage of learning, at which it would be desirable to introduce refinements.

USING PREPOSITIONS IN REAL SITUATIONS

This leads me to suggest that the English teacher (1) begin with situations that are as real and relevant to the student as possible and (2) see which prepositions and adverbs the student needs in order to communicate effectively, that is, to make himself understood correctly.

Classroom phrases

An obvious starting place is the classroom situation. Although for the adult this is not a "real" situation, it is certainly real for the student who spends the greater part of each day in a classroom (and, typically, for our students, at least one hour a day in an English class). To conduct a class—any class—a teacher has to give certain instructions. He says things like:

Stand *up*.
 Sit *down*.
 Wait *outside*.
 Come *in*.
 Go *to* the chalkboard.
 Turn *to* lesson six.
 Open your books *at* page thirty.
 Sit *at* the back of the room.
 Sit *beside* Samir.
 Sit *in front of* Samir.
 Sit *behind* Samir.
 There will be a test *on* Monday.
 Go *with* Ali to the director.
 Today, we are going to talk *about* the exam.
 Where are you *from*?
 I'll see you *at* lunch.
 I'll see you *before* lunch.
 I'll see you *after* lunch.
 Where is the cover *of* your book?
 Write *in* pencil.
 Write *in* ink.
 Put your books *away*.
 Put your books *in* your desks.
 Put your books *on* your desks.
 Put your books *under* your seats.
 Put *on* your coats.
 Take *off* your coats.
 Turn *on* the lights.
 Turn *off* the lights.
 Go *(in)to* the library and bring the dictionary.
 Give it *to* Ali.
 Write it *for* Ali.
 Sharpen it *with* a blade.
 It was taken *by* Samir.

Already, we have far more adverbs and prepositions than can be used in a single lesson, yet each one ap-

appears in a real, communicative situation—not one invented by the teacher—such as:

The spoon is *in* the cup.

John is going *out of* the shop.

John is *at* the barber shop.

Pretended situations have their uses, but real situations are preferable when possible.

Some useful ideas

Here I should make clear the following points:

1. Certain descriptively accurate distinctions made by linguists may not have any place in a pedagogical grammar. Thus the adverb and preposition, respectively, in *Sit down* and *He ran down the stairs* can be taught together with no mention of their labels.

2. The student is likely to make mistakes in the use of prepositions, but since communication is the chief goal of language teaching, I would advocate a greater tolerance of errors as long as they do not impede understanding. Instead of correcting all the student's errors, thereby putting him on the defensive and making him reluctant to talk, the teacher should simply use the correct model while commenting, without interrupting the communication.

3. The influence of the native language need not be all negative. The teacher should make use of similarities between the two languages and give direct translations where they are appropriate and not likely to lead to overgeneralizations. In the classroom instructions listed above, the teacher can translate the prepositions (most of which have direct translations in Arabic).

THREE CLASSIFICATIONS

We can classify the prepositions that occur in the classroom phrases into the following three categories:

1. Case Prepositions

Go *with* Ali.

the back *of* the class

the cover *of* your book

Give it *to* Ali.

Write it *for* Ali.

Sharpen it *with* a blade.

It was taken *by* Samir.

2. Lexical Prepositions

Stand *up*.

Sit *down*.

Wait *outside*.

Come *in*.

Go *to* the blackboard.

beside Samir

in front of Samir

behind Samir

Where are you *from*?

before/after lunch

on/under/in your desks

into the library

3. Unit Prepositions

Turn *to* lesson 6.

at the back of the room

on Monday

talk *about*

at lunch

in pencil/ink.

Put *away* your books.

Put *on* your coats.

Turn/switch/put *on* the light.

Turn/switch/put *off* the light.

Both case and lexical prepositions have direct translations in Arabic:

Case Prepositions

	English	Arabic
agentive	by	/min qibali/
instrumental	with	/ibi/
dative	to	/li/
beneficiary	for	/li/ or /liʔajli/
genitive	of	/alʔiḍāfah/ construction
comitative	with	/maʕa/

Lexical Prepositions

English	Arabic
up	/ʔaʕla/
down	/ʔasfal/
in (place)	/fi/
on (place)	/ʕala/
to (motion)	/ʔila/
into	/ʔila dākhili/
beside	/bijanibi/
in front of	/amāma/
from	/min/
before (time)	/qabla/
before (place)	/muqābila/
after (time and place)	/baʕda/
behind	/warāʔa/ or /khalfa/
under	/tahta/
on top of	/fowqa/

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Naturally, these prepositions will not all be taught at once, but, since they are likely to occur frequently in a classroom situation, they should be taught early so that their daily use can act as a strong reinforcement. It might be argued that some case prepositions, like agentive *by*, can only be introduced when the passive construction is taught, but this is not necessarily so; agentive *by* occurs in such simple structures as *a drawing by Ali* or *a story by Ali*.

All prepositions and adverbs not included in the case or lexical categories should be taught as unit phrases regardless of their linguistic description. For example, the phrase *talk about* should be taught as a unit, and the *to of to you* should be considered a case preposition. (The infinitive *to* is a separate matter and should be taught with the verb paradigm.)

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